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ABSTRACT

This paper presents reflections on the power of project work as it enhances the character development and self-awareness of the young child. Examples from projects illustrate the development of these human values based on project investigations of 4- and 5-year-old children from Hong Kong International School. The first set of investigations focuses on honoring the wisdom of the individual child. Emphasis is placed on respecting the child as learner and the teacher as facilitator. Several examples are highlighted: (1) Measuring the height of an apartment building: Should a child be permitted to try doing an impossible task? What is the role of the teacher when a child makes a mistake? (2) Filling a bottle with water: When a naive hypothesis is suggested for investigation, can that topic be worthwhile pursuing? The second set of investigations focuses on highlighting the social development of the child: (1) Playing the role of St. Nick: Whose shoes get the treats? How does a sense of social awareness develop as this question is answered? (2) Engaging in "on-the-job" training: To what extent does working with professionals at school create a learning community? Answers to these questions help illuminate the dimensions of "humanness" that are apparent in project work and that are worthy of understanding and celebrating. (Author)

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Project Approach: Celebrating Human Dimensions of Learning

Mary Jane Elliott

Abstract

This paper presents reflections on the power of project work as it enhances the character development and self-awareness of the young child. Examples from projects illustrate the development of these human values based on project investigations of 4- and 5-year-old children from Hong Kong International School. The first set of investigations focuses on honoring the wisdom of the individual child. Emphasis is placed on respecting the child as learner and the teacher as facilitator. Several examples are highlighted: (1) Measuring the height of an apartment building: Should a child be permitted to try doing an impossible task? What is the role of the teacher when a child makes a mistake? (2) Filling a bottle with water: When a naive hypothesis is suggested for investigation, can that topic be worthwhile pursuing? The second set of investigations focuses on highlighting the social development of the child: (1) Playing the role of St. Nick: Whose shoes get the treats? How does a sense of social awareness develop as this question is answered? (2) Engaging in "on-the-job" training: To what extent does working with professionals at school create a learning community? Answers to these questions help illuminate the dimensions of "humanness" that are apparent in project work and that are worthy of understanding and celebrating.

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Twelve years ago, UNICEF invited Lilian Katz to present a week-long seminar in Hong Kong titled "Engaging Children's Minds: The Project Approach." I attended this seminar as a confident teacher, proud of the curriculum I had developed. My children were happy and busy learning at school.

During her talks, Lilian presented images and ideas that shocked my understanding of what it meant to be an excellent early childhood educator. She raised questions I had to answer. She called my "achievements" into question. I remember her saying, "There is no assurance that busy and happy children are learning anything!" I left that seminar feeling wounded, but energized, knowing my teaching would never be the same again.

Within months of the seminar, I "engaged" my mind in learning how to initiate project work, and I have been doing projects ever since. I can truthfully say that my best teaching moments and my children's best learning moments have occurred in the midst of doing projects.

In this paper, I will give personal reflections on the power of project work as it enhances the character development and self-awareness of the young child. These examples, based on projects with 4- and 5-year-olds at Hong Kong International School, will highlight the development of important human values. Among these are learning to build a community, to work collaboratively, to experiment with new ideas, and to foster a caring relationship for others.

Teachers and Children as Partners in Learning

Each day, I appreciate more and more the wisdom of young children. They come to school filled with ideas, hunches, and a wealth of life experiences. They have questions to ask. They are looking for partners as they explore new areas of learning. With the child as learner and the teacher as co-learner and facilitator, a strong team is formed.

3

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2

Measuring the Height of Hainan Court

Adjacent to our school is Hainan Court, a seven-story apartment building, housing 14 families, including the family of a child in my class. We decided to study this building as a class project. Investigations ranged from determining the number of windows to conducting interviews with all the tenants in search of answers to questions such as "How many toothbrushes does your family own?"

Because this project was one of my first, I carefully screened which of the children's questions we would use for an investigation. Questions I considered too difficult, I ignored. Why should I have children work on questions that were beyond their ability to answer?

As the project neared completion, one 5-year-old remembered a question that he originally posed that was left unanswered: "Aren't we ever going to measure how tall this building is?"

Feeling cornered and a bit stunned, I asked for suggestions on how to proceed with this investigation. One child proposed that we use a regular ruler to measure, and another put forth that we try a meter stick. I chuckled secretly at these suggestions. Off to the apartment building we marched, and much to the children's dismay, they discovered that measuring sticks were much too short, regardless of how far they stretched their arms above their heads.

Back at school, further thought and discussion continued. Eyeing the jump rope on the playground, one girl proposed that she stand on the ground and throw the rope up to the top of the building. Piggybacking on that idea, Johann exclaimed, "I've got it. We need a ball of string. A 'down' teacher will throw the string to the 'up' teacher on top of the building, and she can catch it."

Off we rushed, delighted with the experiments we planned to do, trying the jump-rope idea first. Even though several jump ropes were tied together, they proved to be too short. Given the information the children gathered from this investigation, they modified the rooftop experiment. They decided it would be better for the "up" teacher to throw the ball of string to the "down" teacher!

You can imagine the hush that came over the children as they waited for the ball of nylon string to be launched over the edge of the building and hit the ground. Screams of delight filled the air. In front of them was a full length of string the height of the building. We carefully marked the string and later measured it at school. Not one child was interested in the final calculation. The key learning experience was the fact that they had figured out how to measure the height of a very tall building.

From this experience, I learned never to disregard any question that a child seriously asks. The way that 5-year-olds solve problems, while not correct by any adult criterion, is not "incorrect" either. Their suggestions are entirely sensible and coherent within the framework of a child's way of knowing. Initially, I was classifying their questions as being too difficult, okay to investigate, or not worthy of our time. Filtering their questions revealed my lack of respect for the wisdom of young children.

Years ago, Piaget knew all about this phenomenon. He warned that a teacher's automatic reaction of putting the child right may curtail his future interest in solving problems. Practicing the art of making theories may be more valuable than learning the right answer. Piaget indicated that children have real understanding only of that which they invent themselves, and each time adults try to teach them something too quickly, we keep them from reinventing it themselves. As Lilian might put it, we would disengage their minds from thinking.

Piaget was not a classroom teacher and did not proclaim to have methods for pedagogical intervention with children in learning situations. Lilian Katz, together with Sylvia Chard and others, provide the link between the theories of Piaget and educational practice. Through project work, teachers acquire the ability to *listen* to children, and children learn to *listen* to each other. They build on the ideas of their classmates in a collaborative setting and are encouraged to formulate new theories. As teachers model respect for the young child as learner, children gain an understanding of what it means to respect others.

The Water Project

As I matured in my understanding of children and the value of project work, I came to value and appreciate all questions that children raise, even ones that seem initially naïve.

During the Water Project last November, a group of 4-year-old children wanted to water the outdoor plants. Equipped with bottles of water, we initiated our work and quickly found our bottles empty. "Where can we get more water?" they asked at once. Intense discussion followed. The children ruled out returning to the classroom to refill the bottles, because that meant walking up three flights of steps. No outdoor faucets were in sight. Liam, the youngest in the group, made a suggestion: "Let's sit on the bench, hold our bottles up and wait for it to rain." Before I had a chance to suggest that we gather more ideas before we decided what to do, the children quickly sat down and held up their bottles. I joined them. We sat there like statues, not saying a word, waiting for a downpour to replenish our water supply. Suddenly a loud noise was heard overhead, and Liam quickly announced, "It's thunder." His excitement was quickly dampened, not by rain, but by the realization that a jet was making the noise.

After exceedingly long minutes of silent waiting, Liam announced, "This is not working." One girl suggested that we look for someone who could tell us where to find water. In our search to locate someone to ask for assistance, Liam noticed a pipe extending from a cemented wall that was draining water from the mountainside into a bucket. The bucket was overflowing. The perfect solution to a difficult question appeared.

The children rushed to the bucket and quickly scooped a bottle across the top of the water. Much to their dismay the bottle contained only an inch of water. They tried again and again, each time being disappointed. Suddenly Guthrie pushed his bottle straight down into the bucket. Bubbles started to dance. When his bottle reappeared, it was filled to the brim with water. "That's how I fill my bottle in the bath tub," he boasted.

Children's real questions, regardless of their complexity, often yield amazing learning. Enabling children to trust their own judgment and pursue answers that are important to them helps them develop skills that will support their learning endeavors for years to come. The determined spirit evident in this project is a highly valued trait for every lifelong learner. An important dimension of learning is acquiring the disposition of active engagement in the learning process throughout our lives. Working with others in solving problems is an important part of early childhood education.

Social Awareness and Character Development

My second series of investigations focused on highlighting the development of social consciousness among children. Through serious dialogue and meaningful engagement, children become aware of their community and the important role they play in it.

The Shoe Project

During the Shoe Project last year, the children raised a pertinent question that deeply fascinated them. "How does St. Nick put candy in people's shoes?" Long conversations developed as the children decided that they would like to "be" St. Nick, but the critical issue focused on who would get the candy. The following is the actual conversation recorded by the teaching assistant, Neiva Balani.

> **Kristen**: "How about we put candy in everybody's shoes in the whole class!"
>
> **Alex**: "No, let's just have it ourselves."
>
> **Kristen**: "But if everyone doesn't have one [candy], they'll be sad."
>
> **Alex**: "Why don't we just eat it. I really want one."
>
> **Tommy**: "We can give everybody, but it's too much people."
>
> **Charley**: "Let's take off our shoes now."
>
> **Kristen**: "No, somebody else's shoes. We ask them to close their eyes and we put candy in. Then they can eat it."
>
> **Charley**: "We can dress up like him."
>
> **Tommy**: "Let's make a mask."
>
> **Kristen**: "Let's put candy in the principal's shoe."

Charley: "She'll be so happy."

Kristen: "Yes, Mrs. Hall's shoes cause she is so sad." [Mrs. Hall's husband had recently died suddenly of cancer, and the children were very aware of her situation.]

Charley: "We can give it to the girl who washes the bathroom."

Alex: "How about us?"

Charley: "The nurse too. She always helps children. And the teachers. And my Mom's shoes."

Tommy: "Ask them to put their shoe off, and then later we'll dress up and take back their shoes with candy in."

Enabling the children to have a focused, heart-to-heart conversation resulted in their discussing a serious topic in complete openness, challenging each other's opinions in an honoring manner. In the end, they moved from "me first" to "others first" in a manner that would shock most adults. The principal was overwhelmed with the kindness expressed by the children. But it was the parents of these children who had tears in their eyes as they heard about the care and love their children were sharing with others.

The Careers Project

My final illustration focuses on the profound effect the Careers Project had on the social milieu of the entire community. After learning about careers in the community, we initiated a project to learn all we could about careers at our school. We walked through the school observing carefully people at work. The children brainstormed a list of jobs they noticed and then selected the career they wanted to learn more about. The principal, nurse, receptionist, handyman, bus director, PE teacher, librarian, juice lady, mailman, and cleaning lady were highlighted. Not one child suggested working with a normal classroom teacher!

In teams of two, the children participated in "on-the-job" training with their career trainer. At the completion of this exercise, the children felt qualified to operate the school switchboard, run the copy machine, laminate posters, collate booklets, fill juice orders, fix bikes, and even clean toilets! The children agreed that if any one of the job trainers got sick, they were willing and ready to be the substitutes.

Even more remarkable is the fact that the relationship between the children and the trainers strengthened throughout the year. Whenever the cleaning lady entered the room, she was greeted. Care was taken to make her job easier. Children waved to their job trainers when they passed them in the hall. When repairs were needed in the classroom, they knew whom to call. They appreciated the care and help of many of the adults at our school. In addition, the children volunteered to help with photocopying, faxing, and laminating. They were developing a genuine sense of responsibility for their own learning community.

Honor and Engage Young Children's Minds

Initially project work is a method that enables the teacher to engage children's minds in meaningful learning. Yet the more we respect and trust the wisdom of young children, the greater the opportunity for learning. Giving children the possibility to experiment, make mistakes, re-think, and try again is a gift that develops the learning potential at an early age. Opportunities for developing a community of care lie dormant in a wide variety of projects that can be brought to fruition when teachers enable children to wrestle with situations that touch social issues.

Learning situations that honor and engage young children's minds and awaken the love that lies deep in their hearts make project work worthy of our understanding and celebration. I thank Lilian for being my mentor in project work and enabling me to appreciate anew the wisdom of young children. In turn, I hope that my life will be blessed by many more such powerful moments of teaching and learning.

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